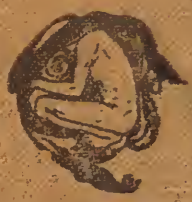
BEHIND THE VEIL

WRITTEN BY
ETHEL WHEELER



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AUSTIN O. SPARE

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BEHIND THE VEIL

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Frontispiece.

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ETHEL ROLT WHEELER
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CONTENTS

Page

PAST INCARNATIONS 3

THROUGH THE MYSTIC DOORS—

THE CURL 43

THE WHEELS REVERSED 55

AN AUTUMN TRYST 69

THE MURKY POOL 83

THE LEPER'S WINDOW 88

PAST INCARNATIONS

STONE-COLD, STONE-QUIET, THE KING OF KINGS SAT ON HIS MARBLE CHAIR

I

ACROSS the columns of sunshine, falling on the heads of the musicians between the columns of stone, I felt the eyes of the African weighing like lead upon my quivering eyelids. The place of the musicians was on the left side of the steps of the throne: but by reason of the faint delicacy of the notes of my instrument, my seat was set at the extreme limit of the line dividing the slave boundary from the court of the King of Kings. As I waited the turn of my five-stringed instrument, I could see, through lowered lashes, the rainbow-glimmer of those marble throne steps; sometimes the purple shadow of the royal robes seemed to touch with a sombre glory the edge of vision; but the eyes of the African weighed like lead upon my quivering eyelids, which pulsed fiercely to be raised; though for a slave to look upon the face of the King of Kings, bore the penalty of death by torture.

Day after day, when the gold of afternoon cut its tiger-stripes upon the shadowy floors, we passed silent-footed through the cool corridors about the Throne-Chamber, into the awful silence of the Presence itself. The air thrilled with the terrible quiet of power; a fear that was splendid because of the mightiness of its cause, wrapped the limbs

like a garment; unworthy and forbidden to lift eyes towards the blinding majesty of the equal of the gods, yet the mere force of so glorious a proximity fluttered the being to its depths, and the emotions beat like imprisoned butterflies, and like imprisoned butterflies the eyelids quivered to rise.

Sometimes, because of the languor that comes of extreme trembling, my fingers had scarce strength to strike the sweetness out of those strings in whose music they were so skilled. The note would falter into the stillness, hesitating, faint with timidity; and only the sharp realisation of the mighty listener could nerve the fingers to their appointed task. Then, answering to the memories in my mind, I drew from my instrument echo after echo of mountain-music, sounds loud as the cataract, and low as the surge of wind in grass, that floated into the air, strong and clear and pure; and I, who was doomed to walk for ever with bent head and with eyes that for ever sought the earth, sent my few wild messengers with more than mortal daring to climb the great stairs of the throne, and penetrate into the very heart of the King.

I had heard in my distant home, whence they had taken me for the music that was in my throat, and in my fingers, that the King was a mighty hunter, and loved the sense of open spaces. And I deemed he heard my music, because it held the call of forces only less splendid than his own; and in the dreadful pauses of silence, when I sat dizzy with sickness for the scenes of my lost freedom that I had been building into harmonies, the desire to lift my eyes to the face of him who so transcended them in majesty, became

a torture in repression that grew in poignancy with every moment.

Sometimes the anguish of the controlled eyelids became so tense, that they must have transgressed my will-power, and hurried me to a horrible death, but for the weight that the giant African set upon them. He stood at the other end of the group of musicians, to keep watch over our glances, lest any of them should stray; but there seemed no moment that I was free of his observation. His ugly stolidity of alertness, though it saved me from the mad promptings of my heart, did but increase the torment; it precluded that half-glimpse through half-shut eyelids that I might have thought to dare. And with every day the prick of desire became more importunate; with every day more racking the agony of control.

One evening I played late into the sunset, and the large metal plates that hung from my belt, interlinked by chains into long bands, caught on their surfaces the ruddy glow. And as I ceased playing, and began to shift my downward glance, a metal plate that lay aslant my knee shone with a glory more magnificent than the sun's,—a splash of purple radiance, glinting and changing as I stirred,—the very splendour of heaven, a reflected light from the purple robes of the King of Kings.

My body seemed to flush through my thin white draperies, as with eyes riveted on that royal glow the full tide of possibilities coursed through my being. By a little wisdom in the calculation of the angle, I should be able without fatality to achieve the sum of my desire: resolve the vague

purple of the disc into lines and folds; sharpen the floating glints of red and green into the jewels of the diadem; and fix that pale halo of light—the blurred image of the King's own face—into the definition of his god-like features, on whose radiance I might feast unhindered, nor die the dreadful death.

But though I polished the metals until they shone like moonlight, my fingers lacked both courage and skill on the succeeding day to set the disc, so that it should receive the splendid vision. Again and again my hand stole towards the appointed plate, sending a mist over its surface, and moved the position with infinite terror, lest the chain should jangle; but it cleared to a shining vacancy, or the dull confusion of stone-reflections, and only once the shadow of purple swept darkly across its moving.

On the afternoon that followed, I set the plate against the edge of my instrument, and bending low over it, the whole throne suddenly shone on me, minute, as if far away, but clear with the clearness of distance in dreams. I saw in the silver unreality, remote, but sharp cut as the lines of crisp water, the sublime form of him who was the equal of the gods, and ruler of the world. He leaned back in his marble chair, with his arms resting upon it; the purple draperies of his robes overflowed the steps. There was the calm of a terrible indifference about him—a gravity of aloofness, as cold as the stars. The dark face, moulded like a god's, stone-quiet; the close-shut hands, the stillness of the form, implied a power the more awful, because of its absolute silence. I had known the loftiness of mountains and the

solitude of wildernesses, but never a loneliness so terrible and so remote. It seemed the very pathos of divinity; and while my soul rose in worship before this dreadfulness of majesty, I felt my eyes grow dim with tears, that I dared not think to be of human pity.

That far perspective in its silver atmosphere followed me through my waking hours and through my dreams, so that my mind, rejecting all lesser images, became at last a shrine for the holding of one jewel. I set the mirror of my metal day after day towards its source of light; I brooded with ever-increasing agony of rapture on the changeless immobility of that awful calm: stone-cold, stone-quiet, the King of Kings sat on his marble chair, and all the powers of death and the grave lay in his unlifted finger. Against the ice of his presence, my body burned as in a fever: a frenzy of love, that was half-adoration and half-passion, shook me, as though I were an aspen leaf in thrills of wind.

His was the face of a god, perfect of beauty and of strength. At least my madness was a sublime madness, though its boldness were sacrilegious; and yet it was no more than a far reflection I worshipped, a tiny surface-combination of lines and lights, removed an infinite distance in space, while the breathing reality was but a stone's-throw off, for ever, even to vision, inaccessible.

Here was the root of bitterness: for the moment came when the throne-reflection seemed thin as a painted image—distorted and inadequate as the shadow beside the substance. My eyelids no longer ached with the stress of mere curiosity; it was the soul that hungered for some nourishment beyond

the film of dreams. Before, the restlessness of ignorance had pricked me; now the knowledge of my deprivation filled me with a vaster anguish. The metal mirror had lit a fire that could never cease, and that it could never satisfy; and not the eyes of the African, but a new and overwhelming fear lest they should dare, and be blinded with the lightning of the gods, set a weight upon my eyelids.

There came a long pause of war, wherein my being languished and flickered as though it would go out. After followed the Feast of Victory, and music, late into the night. Torches were set in the Throne-Chamber, and my belt threw off their flames. They burned still in that crowded stillness, and all the air was tense like a string that is strained. The influence of his presence that I had lacked so long, more terrible and more potent, sent a wild inspiration through my every nerve. My notes sprang alive, buoyant, from my fingers, and my voice rose like the voice of a winged bird, and I sang the chant of victory that they sing to the chiefs in my distant home, and the song of the maidens to their lovers who return from battle, and of the lovers to their maidens, that my lover had once sung to me. Then suddenly I felt the fierce fire of the King's eyes burn to my soul, and they called to mine for answer, loud, insistent, all-compelling; and in a sublime moment I found our glances fast interlocked, his and mine; in one sublime moment I touched the very core of emotion, and saw into the depths of that cold aloofness, which was yet human, gloriously human, beyond the shining image of my thought. He was not altogether god—he was man; and the human love, winning over the divine, leapt to

him from my eyes. For sharp rapture of poignancy, the moment seemed eternity; the eyes held me close,—close,—eyes icy in their indifference, terrible in their uncomprehending calm. Then a finger lifted, and the African was beside me, and my passing from the chamber did not break its silence.

II

THE flash of the brook was like a sword. Between bank and bank the brook cut division,—division of the sword,—for my people dwelt on one side, and my lover's people on the other, and bitter war was between them. But neither here nor there was there room for me, for I had left my own house at call of the great chief of the enemy's host, and when my father would have had me back, I would not come; and now my lover was dead, killed in battle, by treachery as I knew, for in arms he was unconquerable; and his folk shamed me, the stranger woman, shutting me away from the pomp of his obsequies, so that my grief preyed upon itself almost to madness, and but for the manchild I had borne him, I must have died. Then the great ones of his tribe brought me with the baby to the border that they might deliver me again to my own people; and across the brook in the fierce light of noon I saw my father's face set like a stone, and the hard glint of his eyes. The words between the warrior parties were short and sharp, and I was bidden to leap the brook. Thrice I hesitated, that if there were pity

in heaven or earth it might have time to work for me a miracle: at last, stung by a taunt, I sprang across. And as I sprang, the baby in my arms, a gleaming sword seemed with a swish to fall athwart my life, killing my lover in me with a yet more terrible pang, killing happiness and youth, so that I staggered from the blow, and went up the bank feebly like an old woman. My father and the men with him had no hand to help me—they let me totter and sway, and when I joined them, turned their faces homeward without a word. . . . So I, that had left my country crowned with the superb triumph of love, returned a stricken thing, an outcast, accounted a traitor to my kin and to my land.

Yet I had known an ecstasy beyond the reach of any woman in the long stretches of the past: I had been the chosen one of the greatest warrior of all time: his son lay in my arms. The child was very fair, and for one so young, very strong; he was fierce in temper like his father,—even in the chief's gentler moments there had been the stress, as well as the glow, of noon. The same love, which in the man almost hurt by reason of its greatness, came sweet beyond words through the touch of baby-fingers and the cooing baby-voice. What dreams I had dreamed, blazing with light and glory, before the child was born! and after, no dream seemed too wild for fulfilment, no hope too remote.

. . . And now the little hillocks effaced themselves, one after the other, like crouching slaves!—the over-scented air was slack and tame! What place was there for my son amongst these keepers of sheep, who fought, not for joy, but for necessity?

A sharp pang went through me, as I saw the misery of his fate, and at the same moment a cry struck the air. Had I uttered it, or the child? He answered me with cry after cry, beating his hands with violence, and working himself to a passion greater than I had ever seen. I did not seek to check this outburst of nature; the child might have of it relief. My father turned uneasily now and again as we neared the encampment: at last he hissed,—'You must stop the crying.'

I had been wont to soothe my baby by the singing of lullabies, but the low crooning airs were vain against his cries. Striving only to dominate his voice, I broke into the fierce, quick strain of a war-chant, and then let the notes swell into long wails, such as they use in mourning the dead. Presently the loud monotony of song overbore the sobbing, and I let myself go in a frenzy of abandonment. The grief that had been eating into my heart all these black days rushed forth in a tempest of music that seemed to storm the world. I felt a sudden ease—a sudden lessening of pain. My song rose into the air, an agony turned into sound, a wild hymn of triumph rooted in the bitterness of defeat—the passion of love with death at its core. I walked as one in trance, almost in ecstasy: the child ceased crying, and then smiled and then laughed.

So lost was I, that I did not perceive we were passing through a line of men and women, until the insult of their words became too loud to be ignored. They were muttered still, for my father was powerful, but once aware of the hostility on either hand, I saw under my lids the rage in

their eyes that they dared not voice. My song rose into defiance as the whispers thickened, until my father turned, and scowlingly bade me to cease. One warrior spoke roughly, saying it was shame to let me flaunt in their faces my grief for their dead enemy—shame for them to hearken to the dirge that made their victory: but of him and of the others I took little heed, for a terrible weariness had come upon me with the finishing of the song. My limbs ached pitifully, and my head was a burning pain. I went a short way further, and fell.

After a month was gone, they forbade my singing of the lullaby. It was no lullaby, they said, but some barbaric lament that I had learned of the savage tribe among whom I had dwelt. The insolence of my woe was a mock to them. I had recked little how they took my song; I had recked little that its rapture of anguish left me after it was done like a reed beaten by the wind: for I thought that by my fire of singing I might nourish the boy with the stress of mighty emotions, so that as he grew in years he might grow in strength of arm and of spirit to prevail at last in the councils and battles of this weak race. Sometimes also I had to use the counter violence of my song against the violence of his child's passion, which increased in this land which was cruel and alien to him. And, therefore, for all reasons I found it hard to follow the decree that had gone forth against the singing: I felt myself become spiritless without its spur, lapsing once more into dull, brooding misery: and the child drooped before my eyes.

Then it became my practice to take him out into the wilder-

ness, away beyond the hearing of men, and there to sing my lullaby under the bare skies and by the blank pools,—to make myself empty as a shell and let the sounds of the world pour through me, and all the sorrow that has ever been for love that is lost, which is held in the core of the wind. The child would laugh, and his eyes brighten, and the colour return to his cheeks, for he was of that glorious race to whom fierceness of emotion is a greatness and a joy. With evening we would make our way back, he shouting in my arms, I staggering under his weight, very weak, but not wholly wretched.

This thing became known, and they followed me, and once more forbade the lullaby with cruel threats that if the decree were broken again the child and I should be left in the wilderness to perish.

So I let the child pine and fret, and in the watches of the night, instead of my singing, the people heard its crying; and once when I went past two women gossiping at the well the malice of their whisper reached me—'They will surely die.' Then I saw how worn and pale the boy was, and my own shadow how thin; and I wondered if it were better to go out like a sick fire, or in one great flash, like the lightning.

That night I felt my heart breaking with the loneliness and longing of love. The child tossed and moaned, and now I had pity for him, and I murmured at first a low lullaby, hardly above my breath, to soothe him, for it was long—long—long—since he had slept. But he took no heed until the song increased in force, and even then he did not sleep at once; and by that time the tide of music welled so fiercely in

me that it was beyond me to control. Once more I abandoned myself to the dreadful rapture of the lullaby, uttering the misery of us both into the air in one last, desperate agony. Now there was movement outside and the clash of arms, and I knew that the threshold was passed, and that nothing could save us. A great recklessness came upon me, and seizing the child in my arms I went out into the night, and up and down between the tents, up and down, up and down, chanting the war-chant of the enemy, wailing the long notes of sorrow for the dead. I saw the glitter of eyes watching me everywhere, like the eyes of beasts in a jungle, but all the night there was no spring of beast, nor fastening of tooth or claw. At dawn men closed in upon me painfully, confusedly, and brought me, still carrying the child, with horrid din into the open. A bitter way they forced me with words and curses: then I remember silence where they left me, and the sharpness of stone against my naked feet. I stumbled on in a world empty except for the bare skies and the blank pools where we had come to die: numbly I watched the light flicker from night to day and from day to night. . . .

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THE CRUCIFIX GAVE, NIGHT AND DAY,
A PALE INTERIOR LIGHT

III

THE crucifix gave, night and day, a pale interior light, so that I was independent of the outer light that only sparsely penetrated to me. I had been built into my cell, which was within the convent church: walls ten feet high were about me, and over them flowed in great waves the rolling music of the Mass. The atmosphere was heavy and sacred with incense: a darkness almost tangible, washed with misty gold, reached me when the candles burned on the high altar, and the attenuated day came to me a clouded grey, that still held at its core some reminiscence of holy colour —of blue and of red and of green—out of those great stained windows that I could not see, that told the tale of the Birth, and the Death, and the Resurrection.

I had chosen the rule of the anchoress in my order, as being the most strict to discipline my weakness, that I might receive no distraction from the outer world but the food necessary to keep the body in life, and the one word with the sister who passed it through the grating. For, when I took my vows, the flesh was strong against the spirit, and I knew I should find no peace until earthly desires were dug out to the very roots and wholly consumed. And so I shut

away the visible temptations and glories of the world, and raised barriers of stone between myself and that possessing face, whose fierce and passionate entreaty threatened my salvation, and whose importunity I found no other way to resist. But at first the walls availed me nothing; the world that I had renounced beset my senses with a more sharp intensity; the face that I should never see again recurred and recurred in memory, stabbing me with the anguish of irretrievable loss. All the impressions of sights and of sounds that I had thought would prove evanescent, came tumultuously back upon me with a vividness and poignancy exciting almost to frenzy. Those few flagstones of holy church were turned to a battlefield where the fiends fought for my soul; they stuffed my ears with the blare of trumpet at tourney, so that for whole days the healing music of the Mass went by me unheeded; they filled my eyes with the pomp of processions,—the splendour of faces virile with the pride of life,—the wonder of rich brocades,—the glitter of arms; nor could even the crucifix prevail against the intolerable movement and brilliance that tortured my imagination. Sometimes, at the suggestion of the evil ones, hideous blasphemies rose to my lips, and I told my rosary beads to curses, or arraigned heaven with madness of imprecation. Yet the strength that lay deeper than their power could reach never wholly failed, and at last the worst paroxysms gave place to an ecstasy of prayer, that partook too much of the violence it succeeded,—that strove to clutch at heaven, but only in the hope of finding a brief respite from hell. Then I would kneel before the crucifix for days together, pressing

my hands against the nails that nailed the feet to the Cross, until the blood flowed from my lacerated palms; and out of this pain there grew with the lapse of time an intimate mystical comprehension of His sufferings, and my own grew less and less as my sympathies slowly widened to embrace this Crucified Figure that came to save a crucified world. He took upon Himself my anguish, and the salt bitterness ebbed away, leaving behind a great radiance of peace,—a peace terrible in its sweetness, that led me over heights infinitely pale and lonely. And now the music of the chants stirred within me visions and emotions more penetrating and marvellous than those which arrive through the channels of the senses: the clink of the swinging censer, and the sound of the bell at the elevation of the Host, lifted me ever higher into the unbearable zone of light that is around the throne. The sweep of the nuns' dresses over the stones, bringing me back to earth, was balm to my immeasurable weakness —I needed the sense of gentle human presences after the tension of a bliss I could not yet sustain.

Then followed, one after the other, long years of intercession and of praise. In periods of trance the days and nights flitted by me with the brush of angels' wings—flights intricate with silver and shadow, followed by vague confusion of golden pinions beating through the dark. Yet lest my feeble powers should dissipate in the vast regions which were so near to me, and my prayers fall short and lose their efficacy, wanting a definite form, I chose to make the village near by, which clung about the hill where my father's castle stood, the centre of my entreaties, praying for the

poor and the miserable and the diseased, that I had half-seen down fœtid alleys as I rode forth to the chase. So for these people, for these my people, I importuned Heaven with passionate fervour, with persistency of appeal, imploring pity for their sufferings, forgiveness for their sins; imposing upon myself penances for their misdeeds, taking upon myself the burdens that oppressed them, bearing for their sakes the cross of affliction, and the frequent darkness of spiritual despair. So I agonised for them during the years; and ten times the awful masses of Good Friday fell upon the soul, monotonous, like the falling of earth upon a grave. But after this a strange light began to mingle with my vision of the little village; in the faces of the people, still vivid to my imagination, there appeared a new peace; the very stones of the streets and the rafters of the houses were luminous. Sometimes the hill seemed to uproot itself and hang before me suspended, transfigured, in a radiance that was not of earth; and I took this for a sign that my prayers had been heard in high heaven, and that the blessing of God rested upon the people for whom I so fervently strove. Yet my ardour never relaxed, and the music of ten Easter Sundays crowned me with more and more triumphal acclaim. Then I heeded time no longer, living above it in the peace that passes all understanding.

Thus the unwonted sounds of the noise of the falling of great masses of masonry, the wild cries of the nuns, and raucous laughter, beat for some time against my consciousness before penetrating it. At last I was aware that I was in the midst of some horrible tragedy, and thought that hell

had engulfed us all. Only the outline of my cell in the dim light, the roof of the convent church, the shining crucifix, forced me to grope back to the realities of material life. Now I knew that I had had no food for a long time, and that some overwhelming misfortune must have threatened and had fallen. Tales came back to me out of the past, of convents that were sacked and the nuns carried off: I recognised with dreadful certainty that this unthinkable evil was actually upon our house, and threw myself before the crucifix in anguished prayer for my sisters that were beyond all human help, and that God was calling to Himself through the most terrible of martyrdoms. My way of death by starvation would be slower, unless the divine mercy allowed in this cataclysm of horror the soul to escape from my quivering body that writhed on the stones, helpless, beyond all power of spiritual control.

The glare of red lights began to leap over the walls of the cell. I think I must have swooned, for I heard no more, until a volume of sound in my very ears roused me. . . . They were digging me out of my grave. . . . With a supreme effort I dragged myself up from the ground to face them, and a horde of men rushed in upon the spot I had made holy with my penances and my prayers. In the fierce light of the torches they waved before me I caught glimpses of faces dreadful, bestial, glutted with lust and with blood. But they came no nearer; one laughed loudly, almost wildly; the others fell back, and as I staggered towards them, gave me way, and I crossed the church, aflare with riot, unmolested, and fell somewhere on grass outside.

Next I found myself wandering, dazed and swaying, in a little wood. It was daytime; the air struck upon my face with a softness so healing and delicious that tears came to my eyes: dimly between these there floated before me a world exquisite and radiant, and I half deemed myself in Paradise. A tiny stream, coloured with the sky, babbled along; the sky itself stood shyly at the top of the slopes where the trees opened. The crystal note of a bird seemed to buoy itself along reaches of sunshine, and in the branches, and in the red leaves on the ground, there was the rustle of life.

Then suddenly there broke through the underwood beyond the stream a woman, and after her a man in pursuit; and I remembered all that had passed, and old thoughts came back to me, how beauty was but an illusion to snare the soul into false delights. The village lay, as I fancied, beyond the near hill, and if my strength could attain it, my people, to whom I had given my life, would succour my distress, and build for me a little cell on the outskirt of the wood, where I might see the sky and hear the birds, who after all are God's creatures too.

I could scarce make any way against the weight of my long garments, heavy with the dew; a faintness was upon me, but my will was strong to see once more before I died, in very reality, the little village of my vision, transfigured by my prayers, clinging to the hillside in a halo of light.

Struggling along almost unconscious, with pitiful ache in every limb, I perceived at length a landscape of more familiar outline; but I thought the veil of death was already on my

eyes, for the village was blurred, and swam uncertainly before me. The nearness of the goal spurred me to one last effort, and I took the smoke that almost blinded me for the shadows of the Great Valley. My bare feet felt the cobble-stones,—a burning rafter crashed in my path. Instinctively I drew within a deep embrasure, and saw, in one flash of realisation, the piled corpses in the streets, the wretched people driven out by the flames to be slaughtered without distinction of age or sex. For these I had agonised, for these I had wrestled in prayer, for these I had poured out my life-blood before the throne.

Then, through that red carnage and heat, a cold wind struck me, and as I shivered I stiffened.

THE SEA HAD ALWAYS
POSSESSED MY THOUGHTS

IV

I LAY along the rocks, and leaned my hand over till it reached the waters. The grey sky was low upon the grey sea. I shut my eyes, and felt the cold, slow movement of the waves through all my body. What far strands did they touch, these waves, remote from the monotony of our shores?

The sea had always possessed my thoughts. In childhood it was haunted to me by the black and terrifying mystery that ever threatened its horizon. For when they took me to the little church, and I heard the people praying, 'God, deliver us from the wild Northmen!' I clamoured to know what the prayer meant; and they told me how at times the sea would grow dark with pirate-ships, and part before the fierceness of their onslaught; and how the sea-wolves who manned them would bring fire and ruin to quiet places, slaying the men, and carrying off the women to slavery. These words, not rightly understood, filled me with the huge and vague imaginings that make childhood horrible, and night was big with indefinable fears. For whole months I dared not lift my eyes over the sea lest a still more terrifying reality should meet them. Perhaps it was because I avoided the sight of the sea, that it claimed an increasing empire

over my thoughts. As I grew older I used to join with passionate, if uncomprehending, fervour in the prayer that came straight out of the hearts of the people,—'God, deliver us from the wild Northmen!'

My feeling towards the sea changed, I think, on a day of silver, when the calmness quivered a little, and faint clouds floated in a high, liquid sky. I remember looking out over the waters, half-curious, half-fearful. How wonderful, how thrilling, if I were to see the first shadow of one of those strange ships, coming, no man knew whence, to return, no man knew whither! I played with the thought, excited and trembling. I was yet a child: and to stand ever on the threshold of so dreadful a possibility, lent a glamour to the long dulness of the empty days. And now the prayer, 'God, deliver us from the wild Northmen!' sent through the tedium of the service a sharp emotion; my imagination heard shrieks and the din of weapons, and saw flames leaping in a deep night.

So I passed from childhood to girlhood; and after long freedom from danger the fear of a raid began to fade from men's minds. Still they prayed the prayer, but in repetition it had grown mechanical; travellers no more came carrying tales of villages destroyed by these devastators, whose force and courage was as the sea's in storm; and day followed changeless day, and month, month; year grew into year, each the exact counterpart of the last. A weariness was upon me, because of this endless monotony of shifting time. And since the danger was now no more thought of, it seemed to me no wrong, as I lay along the rocks, touching

the waters with my fingers, to dream of those pirates who grasped life at its hot intensity, felt the fire and the sting of it, and terrible as the elements, roused in men a frenzy of fear. I thought of these sea-wolves the more gladly, in that our men were tame and spiritless, sunk in lethargy, and only to be stirred by the stress of vital peril. And soon a bitter impatience was upon me, and I sprang up and scanned the clouded horizon. It was darkening towards twilight, and the tract of cheerless sea was bare. What did I seek? What did I desire? What shadow did I strive to image in the far sea-mist?

Night came down upon an empty world. Now I had fathomed my being to its depths; and the prayer of the people, 'God, deliver us from the wild Northmen!' must henceforth be a mockery on my lips; for I knew that my soul cried out for this one supreme moment of ecstasy and anguish—my blood craved this last wild gallop of excitement; I knew that I longed for the coming of the black vessels upon the barren line of sea, and for the leaping of the pirate-wolves upon our tame strands. Even in childhood this imagination had taken hold of me, turning all my terrors in one direction; and now these terrors had changed to a sharp-edged romance. No prisoner had returned out of that viking land, to say what manner of place it was: the secret of its mystery was dark and unfathomable as the grave. These men came, inevitable as death, and went, leaving death along their track. I realised how, beside this mystery, the common life had come to mean so monotonous and poor a thing; I understood wh the men who

wooed me appeared so thin of substance and so weak of spirit.

Then rumours drifted to us, blown I know not whence, that the raids had begun again, fiercer and more daring than before. A stillness of terror was upon our village, and in all men's faces the strain and pallor of fear. Many planned for a flight to the woods at the first certainty of danger, for even the boldest hearts deemed resistance to be impossible.

One night there came a fugitive flying from a village which used to stand not thirty miles distant—which stood no more, but was marked by smouldering ashes. Of all that village he only had escaped; but power was gone from him to make a tale that was clear, or to say what might help to wise action the minds of our chief men. But on his story many of the villagers fled to the woods, taking with them what provisions and goods they could bear; a few others, deeming that the pirates might have put again to sea, or might not come our way, stayed in the village, and I with them. Often now men and women stood on the low line of rocks, scanning the horizon; yet I was the first to see that dark shadow, over which I had brooded so long, turn from dream into actuality. Some seconds I thrilled to the consciousness of this supreme danger, swiftly, irrevocably approaching upon us; then with little moans and frightened cries the others fled away, and I watched the viking-ship alone. Almost I could discern its movement, almost I could divine the gleaming helmet-lights, when a hand was laid roughly on my shoulder, and turning, I saw him who of all others had been most persistent in his wooing.

'Come!' he commanded in a voice that was strange to me; and through my excitement I saw him taller and nobler than before—so changed, that I hardly knew him. But nevertheless, shaking him off with scorn, I told him I would wait the coming of the ship; for that the soul of me craved to see men that were indeed men, and not hares. He grew pale at this, and made as if to seize me by force: I sprang on the extreme verge of rock, and dared his approach. Muttering to himself words, amongst which I heard 'Death!' and 'Shame!' he came a step closer. 'Not shame,' I answered him, 'not shame,—but death!' For now, when almost the keel grated upon the strand, my heart failed me lest the tragedy should show itself not sublime, as I had dreamed it, but only ugly, as I now saw possible; and I was minded to throw myself into the sea. But he was too quick for me, and clasping me, drew me from the edge. 'Death for both, if you will it so, beloved,' he whispered. My eyes were drawn to his, and then my wildest dreams, my fairest imaginings, were surpassed: I touched the highest point of being, and all things were forgotten in an eternity that lasted one brief moment.

Then I saw men running towards us over the sands, and the evil of their eyes: my lover's knife gleamed above me, and struck.

V

THE chill light of dawn stole through the shutterless window. We had broken up the shutters for firewood in the long frost. The room looked very dreary. On the table were the bits of black bread we had tried to eat overnight, but we were both too tired, and the hard food choked us. The thimbleful of milk I had managed to get for Jean's supper was not quite dry on the board where he had knocked it over. Neither of us had undressed before going to bed. Through the numbness that was upon me after extreme fatigue—for I had been working all day in the fields—I felt dimly how Jean was tossing and tossing beside me through the short night; but my senses were dulled, and till dawn I lay in semi-oblivion. But with waking, if waking it could be called, came misery. I dragged myself up, my limbs trembling and aching beneath me; and to the old hopelessness that faced me was added a new horror of myself that I should have grown so careless as to lie down in my earth-soiled clothes without brushing my hair, or setting the room tidy. I had blamed other women when hardship had made them abandon their struggles after clean-

liness and decency; yet many of these had to see the hunger of their children, and to bear the harshness of their husbands. We had no children,—and Jean . . . Last night, it is true, he was impatient . . . unlike himself; but then, he had been doing a long corvée for the lord, and the forced labour exhausted his mind with indignation as well as his body with fatigue. I went over to the bed. He was asleep now, but very restless, muttering words and plucking at the clothes. I noticed in the grey light how terribly drawn and thin his young face had grown. Well, at least no ugly sight should meet his waking: I would put on a fresh dress, I would borrow some milk from a neighbour for his breakfast. I might leave him to sleep, perhaps, an hour longer; then he must get up, for unless we were to strain every muscle, we could not keep starvation at bay.

A cold mist lay on the land as I took the bucket to the well. The wretched harvest, not yet cut, shivered in the low fields. All the summer, hailstones and cruel drought had been fighting against the earth, and the thin poverty of the rye and oats that survived was scarcely life. There was not a touch of gold in the colour, and the stretch of fields looked bleared and haggard. The water spilled about the well nourished a rich growth of nettles and docks, which none had the energy to clear. I filled my bucket, but after I had carried it a few steps I had to rest. All my strength had ebbed out of me. Going very slowly, and with frequent pauses, I nearly got it to the cottage. Then I tripped and overturned it. I sat down on the bank, and the stupor came over me, so that it seemed impossible I should move all day:

but after what must have been a considerable time I roused myself and went again to the well. In lowering the bucket my wedding-ring slipped off my finger into the water. I felt a pang and a fear, and looked with curiosity at my shrunken hand; but indifference quickly followed, and with a little water in the bottom of the bucket I returned home. It was with great weariness of effort that I put on a washed dress, and made the room tidy. There was no time now to get the milk,—the neighbours were a long way off, and Jean must not sleep longer. I put my hand softly on his shoulder. 'Jean, Jean!' I said. He did not answer. I shook him gently, and he waked. 'Let me be,' he answered sullenly. 'You must get up,—it is late,—you have slept too long already,' I said, but he turned away from me. 'I shall sleep all day,' he told me.

'But the work,—the work!' I exclaimed, 'I could do so little, —and now I can do no more.' 'It's no use, it's all over,' he muttered. 'We've tried,we've done our best; but this is the end. Leave me, for God's sake; I think I can get to sleep.'

'Dear, it is not the end yet,—it need never be the end. Rouse yourself, Jean,—you must, you must!'

He shook me off. 'It's no use, no use ever again,' he murmured, 'I meant to tell you last night . . . but I couldn't. . . . Can't you see I'm weary to death? Let me get a moment of rest . . . while I can.'

He looked so ill and so worn that a great pity came over me for him and a great surge of love. Forgetting all wise and practical cares, I laid my cheek against his cheek. It was burning with fever. How after that could I make him go

out into the chill fields? . . . And yet, and yet. . . . We should never be able to make good these days. The wolf pursued so close behind that even a brief halt would bring him up, ready to spring. And then . . . it was dreadful to me that Jean should stay in bed. So Pierre had stayed in bed, since it seemed to him useless to get up, and his wife and his children,—and they had died. But that was in the winter, and bed at least was a little warm. I remembered how in the spring Marcel had stayed in bed . . . it meant the abandonment of the last hope, the final surrender. And now Jean! He was tired, I knew, tired to the point of fever; but if the will once gave, I did not see how it would ever be able to resume power. That meant drifting lower and lower, until death clutched one. I was not afraid of death if I could meet it with self-respect, but to lapse into it through self-indulgence, degradation, dirt! . . . Jean must get up, he must get up!

But now he had fallen into a deep peace. He breathed evenly, and there was content in his face. I could not wake him again.

I opened the door. A dim sun flitted like the ghost of itself about the fields. It struck a sense of warmth into me, and I leaned against the lintel, and allowed myself to taste the deliciousness of giving in. No more frantic strain, no more spurring the rebellious body to impossible tasks; no more hideous cares for the future, but absolute quiescence, unbroken rest. The sun's heat still tempered, the sun's light still veiled, penetrated my body, soothing it inexpressibly; and I fell into a doze, leaning against the lintel of the door.

I partially awoke to the tonic quality of a voice ringing in my ears. It was so full of vigour and of joyous health that even to listen to the tone of it sent the blood coursing more quickly through the veins. The voices of the neighbours were thin,—even the voices of the young men had a querulous note: the voice I waked to was in itself a stimulant to the senses, and at first I did not hear the words that were spoken, but listened immovable to the voice, with closed eyes. Another voice broke upon the first—a voice I recognised with terror—the voice of the lord's overseer, a man who bore upon the poor people with a cruel oppression.

'It is Jean Bonvoisin's cottage,' the overseer was saying, 'the man who dared to speak to your lordship yesterday.'

'The insolent dog who defied me!' exclaimed the first voice, 'and that young woman by the door,—who is she?'

'His wife, seigneur,' replied the overseer.

'Much too pretty and delicate a flower for a cottage garden,' broke in another young man's voice. 'Come, Henri, that low-born ruffian deserves some punishment,—let us give his charming lady a ride to the castle.'

'I bade them trample down his field,' said the lord, 'but your suggested punishment offers promise of better sport. Wake her, and bring her to us.'

. . . If I were to scream, Jean would come out, and they would kill him. I had no knife to kill myself. I opened my eyes as the overseer seized me. The lord, as I guessed him to be, and another lord, were sitting on horseback in the road. It seemed they had just come from the chase,—I could hear the distant baying of the hounds. I had never

seen men so full-blooded and handsome, or such richness of dress. I knew a mortal terror.

'Well, my pretty one,' said the lord, 'this fine husband of yours has no doubt told you of his own undoing, and my mind was to ruin you both; but then, I had not guessed how graceful a lily flowered under his cottage-roof.'

'If you will show mercy and pardon him, seigneur,' I murmured, though I could hardly speak the words for fear, 'we will pray for you every day of our lives.'

'You are the price,' said the lord, 'I pardon your husband if you come with me.'

'Lift her on my horse!' cried the other lord, 'to parley on these matters is absurd.'

'I do not go,' I whispered. But the overseer had me in his arms. I did not call to Jean. There were three men, and he was only one. The end would be the same, but I should see him killed first. He must be sleeping very soundly, for the lords spoke in loud voices, and the tramping of the horses made a sound like thunder. Then the other lord took hold of me by the arms to lift me up beside him. With a sudden movement I managed to slip from his grasp, and fell on the ground under the horse's feet. I think the horse bolted, for I heard a cry, and a great whirring of noise: then the hoof of the other horse struck my forehead with a heavy blow.

THROUGH THE MYSTIC DOORS

A LOCK OF HAIR, BROUGHT ME IN THAT TENDER WAY BY THE BILL OF A BIRD

THE CURL

E were sitting on the terrace of an old French château, sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes. It was a hot autumn afternoon. The tapestries of the woods were worked in the faded colours of decay; they rustled with the sentiment of the lost, the past, and the dead. The warm sun had raised a wavering veil of moisture about them, and in allowing for its influence one was inclined to exaggerate the definition of leaf-line underneath,—that delicate definition, incident on the sparseness of autumn, which charges the smiling abundance of summer with the first exquisite thinness of renunciation, to sharpen later into the hard features of winter asceticism.

Beneath the tobacco smoke my old friend's face showed shrivelled and wrinkled with a like delicacy of line. Its sentiment of expression was almost one with the sentiment of this essentially French moment of the year. The woods were sad, but they were more happy than sad; with them it was the time of dreams, and they were haunted by the fragile loves of a vanished spring. The sorrow that was in them was plaintive, wistful,—almost a tender impersonation: theirs was the sentiment of sorrow, its iridescence and play, unconscious of any depth or darkness of suffering.

It was forty years since I had met Louis de Brissac. In Paris, as young men, we had been close friends. I had gone over to study in the French capital, and from the very first Louis had won me to him by the charming romance of his friendship for me. Since that time, during the long years in India, men had come near to the fibre and core of me through mutual danger and mutual endurance; I had felt the stir of those silent friendships whose most open manifestation is a firmer hand-grip, an understanding eye-glance. Beside these hidden vital emotions the memories of my Paris friend were as pale-coloured as his autumn woods, but yet in these far-off memories there was a sweet fragrance which the robuster attachments lacked. Louis had written to me regularly for years and years: I had whole boxes of letters in his fine, pointed handwriting. He was expansive, and thought no detail too trivial for my interest: not only was I familiar with the administration of his estate down to the minutest particular, but also his whole mental life, with all its philosophic doubts and conjectures, was laid open before me. The letters were written with flow and lucidity; they were full of keen observation and admirable criticism of life and books. But partly through lack of time, partly through difficulty of composition in the French language, and mostly through constitutional self-repression, my replies were, I fear, somewhat bald and brief. Then, during a period of extended travel, I missed several of his letters, and, having no incentive to write to him, I let the correspondence end.

On my return from India the London doctors advised me to try the waters at Vichy, and thither I repaired, intending

to find out if my old friend still lived in the neighbourhood. On the very first evening I came across him unexpectedly. I had dropped into the Cercle Privé to watch the gambling, and amid the grasping and repulsive faces of those present my attention was attracted by an old man of great benevolence of aspect. I could not be mistaken. I knew him at once, in spite of his white hair and his wrinkles. The peculiar charm, the dash of melancholy happiness, that had always belonged to Louis, were there still, more marked than ever. He was playing the game with a childish pleasure,—staking deliberately, but not high. He had evidently set a limit to his losses, for presently he came over, with a pleasant word to a friend or two, toward the window where I was standing.

'Louis!' I said, touching his arm.

He looked at me for a moment quite blankly. Then his face grew irradiated. 'Richard!' he said, pronouncing the name French fashion. 'It is Richard,—my friend Richard Wright! My poor Richard, but how you have changed!'

I smiled. 'Well, it is forty years,' I replied.

'And to meet you here!' he continued. 'I always dine here when I come to Vichy on business. And I play a little. It is excitement. If you win, excitement; if you lose, more excitement. . . . My friend Richard Wright! . . . I am overwhelmed! . . . You must come home with me to-night. Why, I insist,—I absolutely insist. My carriage is here. There is a room ready for you. It is too great happiness to have you with me at the Château de La Tour.'

There was no resisting the pressure of his invitation, his

faithfulness of friendship. I consented, though quizzically, half doubtful what manner of welcome I should receive from Madame or Mademoiselle de Brissac. I supposed, of course, that Louis had married in the long interval since we had ceased to correspond,—that he had children. But I was wrong. I found the château presided over by an old butler and his wife, who superintended the servants.

And so, on the next day, looking out on that delicate autumn landscape, so full of vague and lovely regrets, I felt impelled to break our silence with the remark, 'So there never was a woman in your life?'

A greater sweetness came into my friend's face. 'Yes, Richard, there was,—and is,' he replied. 'I will tell you about her when we go in. You will think it—you may think it—rather a delightful story. Perhaps you will only laugh at me. . . . And you, my friend,—you have never married either? No, no . . . do not answer me. I see I have touched pain. I would not have you speak out of a sore wound. I want to know no more. Forgive me,—forgive me!'

'You are—happy in her?' I asked in a low voice.

'But you must hear the beginning,—you must see,' said Louis. 'Tell me, did my last letters make mention of any hobby of mine?'

I reflected a moment. 'A hobby?' I repeated, a little puzzled.

'Why, yes: one must have a hobby,—birds' eggs,' said Louis. 'It is a hobby full of poetry, of romance, of sentiment. When I was young, it took me out into the open

woods, out in the springtime, out in the early morning. Every specimen I collected made me more exquisitely aware of the marvels of creation, and woke in me new wonder for nature's supreme artistry of colour and curve. Have you ever pondered over a bird's egg, Richard,—over the frail brittleness that encloses the germ of sublime music? As the crinkled shell is characteristic of the crisp ocean,—as it is thin, but of infinite resistance, and shaded mainly with the yellow and red hues of sand,—so the bird's egg is characteristic of the softer contours of the land, and memories of leaves and skies are blended in the greens and blues of its shell.'

'That seems to me . . . just a little fanciful,' I protested; 'but to tell the truth, I have not given the subject any attention.'

'I will show you my collection presently,' said Louis. 'I am arranging and classifying it now. Of course I am too old to get any more specimens myself, and I fear to employ the village lads, lest they should be lacking in wise discretion. But believe me, Richard, on the most bitter winter's day my birds' eggs are potent to bring the spring vividly before me. Within these fragile cases, I whisper to myself, there lives in essence the whole magic of spring —its crystal-clear calls, its high and liquid notes, its flash of lark mounting into the sky, all its varieties of faint flutterings among new leaves. I touch my eggs and say, "Thrush, finch, wood-dove": and the pressure of woven nests grows round me, and I see the green-cradled babyhood of birds.'

'I wonder,' I said, 'that you ever found the will to take and blow the eggs?'

'Ah,' Louis replied, 'you are too prosaic. I take but one egg of many; with us scientific interest does not necessarily kill sentiment. And the birds do not resent it; they have been kind to me, kind beyond expression. They have given me a gift. I have told you this that you may be in the right mood to understand. Come in, now; I will show you.'

Together we went into the château. It seemed to me charged with an atmosphere of old-world sentiment, conventionalised by the lines of ancient perpendicular wall papers, of panels and parquets of oak,—dim hand-worked tapestries reproduced within-doors the rapture of autumnal decay. A sombre richness had grown about the greens and blues of the threads, like an emergent shadow; there was the pallor of exhaustion in the blanched yellows and waning whites. Everywhere huge potpourri of roses renewed about the corridors the sentiment of the lost, the past, the dead; giving for the passionate beauty of June an attenuated sweetness, grown a little sickly in heavy confinement. Louis led me up the stone staircase to a long, bare room, arranged as a museum, with a number of cases containing birds' eggs. It was inconceivable to me how any one could extract a dream of springtime from so arid a spectacle. Louis drew me over to a table upon which stood a casket jewelled with small turquoises: this he opened with a key. Within lay a curl of golden hair tied with a piece of faded blue ribbon.

'She is with me always,' he said dreamily; 'her sunny

presence pervades the house; I almost think, at times, I see her flitting up and down the staircase. Before, I was lonely, —lonely and often bitter,—but since she came all has been changed.'

'Your dead wife,' I said reverently, for the moment forgetting.

'No, no; I was never married. I told you that. But I did not tell you why. There was consumption in our family. I consulted a doctor after you left Paris. . . . I did not think I was justified——'

I grasped Louis' hand. 'My friend, my friend, how could I guess at so deep a tragedy?' I exclaimed, deeply moved. Here indeed was courage, heroism. 'I fancied,—forgive me, —I fancied you had not known real suffering. My own case . . . I have loved too.'

'But . . . let me finish. I think you mistake. I never loved . . . in the flesh,' he interrupted hastily. 'That would have been terrible, terrible. I could not have conquered a great passion. I think I should have killed myself.' He touched the curl. 'I never saw her,' he went on. 'I found this . . . just as it is now . . . tied up with blue ribbon . . . in the nest of a bird. That is my romance, Richard,—the whole of my romance.'

'But—I don't understand!' I gasped.

'It gave me something tangible to build upon,—a lock of hair, brought me in that tender way by the bill of a bird, associated with all that is dear and beautiful and wonderful to me. I think: this bit of sunshine in the soft moss of a nest, a golden pillow for wee feathered things. She would

be pretty, with such hair! She has blue eyes and gentle ways; she has changed a little during the long years she has been with me, but always she is young, always she is sweet and lovable, with golden hair. Her gentle companionship has grown dearer to me, and dearer; her voice is the blended voice of all birds, and the lightness of the birds is in her step, and their timidity and soft, nestling ways.'

'But it is a dream!' I exclaimed.

'Perhaps. Still, there is the curl,' he said. Then he put his hand on my arm. 'It puzzles you,' he continued, with a whimsical smile. 'No Englishman is like that: you are material, and must have the substance; you do not understand that a dream has as actual an existence as a reality. We have the better of you, dear Richard, in this: we have found one secret of happiness.'

'If there had ever really been a woman,' I began.

'I know. This could not have happened,' he said gravely, 'it could never have happened in that case, and I should have suffered—like you.'

I took up the curl, examining it curiously. At one time I had given some study to physiology. 'But this is not woman's hair,' I remarked, without thought.

Louis grew pale. 'Not woman's hair!'

Then I realised the mischief I had done. I cursed myself inwardly that in a moment of recklessness I had shattered the whole fabric of his life's dream. It is, of course, easy enough to tell from a lock of hair the age and sex of the owner when it was cut off, and it was quite evident that this curl had been taken from the head of a young child. But

why had I not had the wit to keep the discovery to myself? Why must I burst in with my crude science upon this delicate, incomprehensible romance?

'Not woman's hair!' repeated Louis.

'It is the hair of a child,—of a young child,—about seven years old,' I said dully. 'O Louis, I should not have spoken.'

He looked dazed, bewildered. The next moment he was wringing my hand ecstatically. There were tears in his eyes. 'Richard, Richard,' he cried, 'I had never thought of that,—a child! We pass the time . . . for loving women, and sometimes I have felt . . . lately . . . that an old grey-haired curmudgeon like myself has no right to let his fancies run for ever on golden-haired maidens. But a child, a little girl—one is never too old to love a child! It is what the château wants beyond all else—childish laughter, the patter of childish feet. O Richard, think what you have given me—a little child, to be with me always till I die! It is good—it is good that you came!'

He leaned on me, almost overcome. But I . . . I could not understand. Only in my heart was a great void—a pitiful cry for that childish laughter, the patter of childish feet, which I should never hear.

It was twilight when we reached the staircase. The wind was in the tapestries on the walls. They rustled like a shower of falling leaves. Suddenly Louis touched my arm. And down at the bottom of the stairs, amid the fantastic movings of the hangings, I thought for one moment I saw a brief vision of a little golden-haired child.

HE LOOKED OUT FOR SOME TIME
INTO THE SILVERING DARKNESS

THE WHEELS REVERSED

'WE have been friends for exactly ten years,' said Thornhill Morris in a low voice, 'it is time to say good-bye.'

Dr. Wallscourt gazed at him for a moment in speechless amazement. 'Look here, Thornhill, I'm not fool enough to suppose that you want to break with me simply because I happened to turn idiotic in our climbing expedition to-day. It was a nasty bit, and—well, my nerve isn't what it was. . . . I know I nearly killed you, and myself into the bargain. Oh, I am willing readily to accept the lesson. I'm getting old—my forty years are beginning to tell; no more giddy heights for me. It's a stage we've all got to come to sooner or later, and your cooler head and greater powers of endurance hardly justify you in so very blatant a piece of cynicism as your remark implies.'

Morris, who looked a good deal younger than the doctor, drew his chair closer to his friend and laid a hand upon his arm. He had a grave and pleasing face, which would have looked quite ordinary, but for some indefinable quality of melancholy, that gave it an elusive, haunting interest. His actions were usually marked by a certain old-world stateliness, but to-night his native dignity had deserted him;—he seemed agitated and restless.

'Dear old Edward, don't let's misunderstand each other after all these years,' he said, 'I've not got to tell you that your friendship has been . . . just one of the best things in my life. As to getting old . . . to say truth I envy you your every sense of pain, your every ache of stiffness. This I don't expect you to understand. But indeed there are reasons—cogent reasons—why we should part.'

'You do not deny that these reasons are connected with the question of age,' observed Wallscourt.

'Not . . . not in the way you mean,' Morris replied. His voice faltered; he got up and went to the window.

They were in the smoking-room of the hotel at Wastdale Head, which that night they happened to have to themselves.

Morris looked out for some time into the silvering darkness, his face working; then he turned towards his friend.

'Edward, I want you to take my word on trust,—have faith in me,—faith just this once, in my judgment for us both. It is better . . . indeed it is essential—that we go separate ways.'

'I take nothing on trust,' answered Wallscourt. His pale face, square in build, which gained its character, its expression of concentrated force, from the shape and lines of the overhanging brow, assumed a sterner aspect; there came an alertness of light in the somewhat weary blue eyes. 'I take nothing on trust,' he repeated, 'I have the right to demand an explanation. I gave you . . . all that one man can give to another: you had free passage into my most secret thoughts. And now—now you suggest airily that it

is time to say good-bye. Tell me frankly that you are tired of me, that you have outgrown me, and I suppose I must shrug my shoulders and accept the somewhat bitter inevitable. But understand, Thornhill, you owe me the truth,—I insist upon my right to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.'

'Have I not given in equal proportion?' asked Thornhill, 'you know well . . . how much I admire . . . how much I love . . .' His voice broke. . . . 'We do not talk of such things. . . . But Edward, there are reasons. . . . I cannot give you the reasons—you would think me mad. . . . Has it never occurred to you, never for a moment, that I am not quite like other men? Can't you see something . . . different about me? Look, look at my face. . . . Don't be harsh, old friend,—I am desperately unhappy.'

He stooped, almost kneeling, beside Wallscourt's chair. The doctor scanned his features closely in the lamplight. There was a perceptible pause, then Wallscourt spoke: 'You are talking, you are behaving, like an emotional schoolboy,' he said brightly, moved by the signs of suffering he saw, as well as by a strange, pathetic touch of youthfulness in his friend's expression. 'You are certainly very different to-night from the Thornhill I recollect when we met here first, by chance, some ten years ago. I was a youngster of thirty then, and you awed me by something staid, almost Early-Victorian, about your appearance and manner. I took you to be a good deal older than myself, I was proud you should seek my acquaintance,—your brilliance of conversation, your extraordinary range of knowledge, fascinated

me. So we became friends,—you were my guide, my ideal. Then, with years, we seemed to grow into closer equality; you had lifted me up to your intellectual level, and our friendship assumed its rare and perfect intimacy. But lately —I suppose I am ageing too rapidly—we have drifted a little apart. You have become prey to a curious melancholy; you brood, you keep away from your friends. And to-night the position is actually reversed. I am the aged wiseacre, and you . . . you look like a mere sentimental boy, instead of a sober, middle-aged man of at least forty winters. Come, Thornhill, what is distressing you? Why not confide in me?'

Morris stood up. 'Honestly . . . I appeared more or less like other men?'

'Why, certainly,—a little more in the clouds, a little more fastidious, perhaps; more impatient for change, more hopeless of result: yes, no doubt. You stood aloof from all the movements of the time; you spoke out of what seemed an almost abnormal experience. It was part of your magnetism, though you puzzled me occasionally, I confess; and on reflection,—yes, once or twice I was aware of some element in your character utterly new and bewildering to me. What is the secret, Thornhill, since you allow there is one?'

Thornhill Morris went over again to the window. The moon had by this time risen over Scawfell. He spoke in a dreamy voice, without turning round. 'You were talking just now about getting old. I hear a great deal on all sides about the fearsomeness of getting old. It is a commonplace of conversation. To lose the fire, the enthusiasm, the wild fresh-

ness of morning! To know the keen edge of pleasure blunted once for all! Then gradually for the limbs to grow stiff, the faculties to decay,—how sad, how ghastly, how gruesome! . . . You are familiar with all that kind of stuff, Edward? There was a time I uttered such rubbish myself.'

'Unfortunately, the coming on of age is a sober fact,' said the doctor, rather testily. He suspected an artifice in the renewal of this subject. 'You can't get away from it by calling it bad names.'

Thornhill faced round. 'Have you ever thought how it would feel to be getting young instead of getting old?' he asked. 'Will you for a moment try and think of this possibility, not as a golden impracticability, but as a harsh, unavoidable reality? The years as they recede gather about them a halo, which is the mere mist of distance; you would realise this quickly enough if you could reverse the dial and go backwards. . . . "Oh that I were twenty-five!" . . . "Oh that I were twenty!" sighs the middle-aged world; but would any sane person choose in actuality to live again through those periods of acute suffering—suffering unproportioned, because it has no standard—that imprisons our untried faculties in a maze of disillusion and mystery to which we have not yet found the key? Oh, youth has dazzling heights too, and we fall from them down, down, down into the abyss! Edward, can you remember when you first came to know the evil and the cruelty of the world? That is the most awful moment of life: no individual pain can ever after equal the shrinking horror that confronts at that moment the naked and trembling soul.'

'What has all this to do with our friendship?' asked Wallscourt, after a pause.

'Let me finish. Try for one moment to credit my supposition, admit for one moment the possibility of going backwards; contemplate as a near future the torturing doubts, the quivering faiths of youth; regard as an approaching experience the deceptive imaginings, the tortured awakenings of childhood. It is not so much the tyranny of the nursery that daunts, with its puzzling, unmeaning restrictions, the ceaselessness of its petty slavery; what appals is the thought of traversing again that impossible child-world, that trackless country of vague and impalpable perils where we wandered during the first twelve years of our lives. To pass from middle-age to old age, is to float along a series of fair and gentle slopes towards a securer, serener landscape; but to return to childhood is to plunge down precipice after precipice, to change from one Protean shape to another, to lose all sense of continuity or identity, and to live in a land peopled by childish terrors, compared with which the worst visions of delirium are mere graceful fancies.'

'Allowing your proposition to be true,' said Wallscourt, 'I hold your statement to be absurdly exaggerated. You are imagining the case of an over-sensitive organism,—the ordinary healthy child has compensations that far outweigh its momentary fears.'

'I put the case rather strongly, perhaps,' answered Morris, 'but you will grant that it is nearer truth than "the trailing clouds of glory" or the "golden age" representations. It is,

in fact, a great deal nearer. . . . Edward, Edward—thank God that age lies before you, not youth,—not childhood,—not—infancy!'

There was a drawn look on the doctor's face. 'What has put such thoughts into your head?' he asked.

'You said . . . that when you first . . . knew me, I seemed older than you were,' faltered Morris, 'and that now the position . . . is reversed. . . .'

Wallscourt lifted the lamp and went over to where Morris stood. Once more he scrutinised intently his friend's face. A mad notion was taking form in his mind—an unheard-of absurdity, from which he sought to free himself. He put down the lamp.

'You look barely thirty,' he said abruptly.

'I am in fact twenty-nine to-night,' breathed Thornhill slowly.

'And when I first met you?'

'I was thirty-nine.'

'Man! Impossible!'

'If you calculate by the number of years I have lived, I am one hundred and twenty years old.'

The doctor began pacing the room uneasily, and Thornhill went on:—'If you come to think of it, there's nothing so wonderful in living one hundred and twenty years. Science asserts that, if properly treated, the body should be good for, at least, twice the term of years it lasts at present. And leaving out of account unproved legends, such as that of the Wandering Jew, we have almost incontrovertible evidence that certain secret societies—the Rosicrucians, for example—

discovered the means of prolonging life indefinitely beyond the usual limit. Only, in the case of a disciple endowed with this quasi-immortality, the growth and the decay of faculty and function are arrested; the world rushes past him with its changes of season and of seas, but he remains ever the same, growing neither younger nor older, unrestricted by the conditions that bind most of us slaves of change and time.'

'Thornhill, this is hallucination,' interjected the doctor, 'you are ill. . . .'

Morris passed his hand wearily across his brow. 'I was seventy-five when I discovered the secret,' he continued, 'it was in the year 1861. But I made some mistake, some fatal mistake. Instead of merely attaining to a continuation of life, I reversed the life-process; instead of suspending the wheels of mortality, by some inexplicable error I caused them to work backwards. I have been getting younger for the last forty-five years. . . . Edward, you know all the horrible conceptions formed of those whose lives have been magically, or, if you will, scientifically prolonged,—the shock of incongruity that a Rip van Winkle must feel, the endless lassitude of the Wandering Jew, the grasping degeneracy of the harpies in Gulliver's Travels. But no one in his wildest dreams has ever conceived such a tragedy as I have to face: the tragedy of losing, one by one, all my painfully acquired weapons of defence, all the comfort of philosophy and experience,—the tragedy of drifting back through chaos into the unknown. I cannot think of it. . . . It would be better to kill myself.'

'What you tell me is incredible,' said the doctor, 'and

yet when I look at you . . . I remember once . . . you spoke, as if from personal knowledge, of certain obscure effects of the Napoleonic wars; you expounded to me some medical theories of Coleridge that, wishing to refer to in my lectures, I found it impossible to trace. I remember. . . .' A whole flood of recollections swept across the doctor's mind. He recalled Thornhill's social aloofness, his invariable method of tracing daily events to remote origins, his extraordinary intellectual range, and the vitality and minutiæ in his descriptions of events a century old. It struck him now for the first time, that in all their ten years of closest intimacy, he had never learned anything of his friend's relatives or connections. He knew him to be, like himself, without family, and further curiosity never occurred to him. But now the realisation came upon him with a strange significance. Strongest evidence of all,—he had seen Thornhill growing visibly younger before his eyes. . . . That very day, when there had nearly been an accident in the gully, Thornhill had shown a nerve, a reliance upon his muscle, and a power of endurance, surely impossible to any one unless in the full prime of early manhood. . . . 'So you see,' Thornhill broke in upon his meditations, 'it is time to say good-bye. My friendships have all been limited to ten years, else it would have been impossible for me to keep my secret: from sixty to fifty, from fifty to forty, the alteration in appearance is not so very perceptible. But now, from thirty to twenty, I shall change yearly, perhaps even more rapidly, and after that . . . I have never told any one before; but our comradeship had

been so much more to me than any other . . . and . . . oh, this is a sore time! . . . You forced the confession from me,—I could not have you think of me . . . with unkindness. . . .'

'I cannot believe anything so preposterous,' the doctor said, rousing himself, 'but even if it were so, there is all the greater reason for continuing our friendship. You will need me, my help, my advice even as a young man; you will want my protection as a boy. Thornhill, you must not go out of my life, you must not face these terrors of youth—if such indeed there be—without one near you who understands. That you exaggerate these troubles is more than evident, but to some extent I realise that they exist. Our relationship must be altered, I admit, but it will be as close as before.'

Morris grasped the doctor's hand. 'My friend . . . my father!' he murmured. Then with an almost whimsical smile that was full of pathos, he added: 'But you don't know what you're undertaking. I may fall in love,—I was a gallant in those old days; and oh, all the miseries I went through! We laugh at lovers' pains—in retrospect. . . . But if we feared a recurrence? . . . Reflect, Edward, I shall love passionately—it was in my nature—and yet my terrible secret must keep me apart from every good woman. I can never marry. This mattered nowise in my studious middle life, but . . . who can gauge the folly of youth? I had best end it once for all—or shut myself up in a monastery.'

'Was there ever any one . . . any one that mattered?' asked Wallscourt with hesitation.

'Yes; her grave is in the little churchyard outside. It is

dated 1814. Shall I tell you the story? My long, long life has been clouded by it. She was only the daughter of a farmer. I stayed at her father's farm in those far-off days, when I was discovering the climbs that we have since done together. We loved each other devotedly. . . . There is no question here of the halo of Time. I have never met any one like her—any one so high-spirited, so pure-minded She had all the virility of the mountains, yet an exquisite grace and delicacy, like the passing of cloud shadows over a sun-parched landscape. O my friend, is not the tale somewhat too stale for you? It is so old, so trite, so eternal in its ruthless recrudescence through all time. . . .'

'Go on, please,' said the doctor.

'A mésalliance in those days was almost an impossibility: besides, I was poor, and practically dependent. I lacked courage; to speak more honestly, I was a coward. The whole force of family influence was brought to the separation of us. I was a dastard, Edward,—a scoundrel, a mean cur. . . . It was a hundred years ago, my friend,—remember that, and have pity on me. Since I might not have her as my wife, I asked her . . . I insulted her by asking . . . I shall never forget the look on her face. She loved me, and I had killed her soul. I left her without another word, and I never saw her again. A year afterwards I heard of her death. She was lost upon Great Gable. How she fell was never known. I was in Italy at the time—but . . . O God! . . . Edward, how it all comes back to me . . . the delirium of grief, the anguish of remorse! . . . Must I live through it all again?'

'As you say yourself, the story is nearly a hundred years old,' the doctor reminded him.

'And I have gone back into the very heart of it,—the wheel has come full circle. I was twenty-nine then, I am twenty-nine now. The pain is as vital, as fresh, as unbearable. . . . Edward, come out, and I will show the very gate where we used to meet. The moon is still up; we can find our way through the meadows in spite of the mist. To take you there will help to make me realise that the past is truly dead . . . will help me to disentangle . . .' He passed his hand over his brow with the old movement. . . . 'Come, Edward, you are not too tired?'

Wallscourt shook his head, and together they went out into the moonlight. The mountains rose dark and indistinct against a rapidly clouding sky. The drifts veiled and disclosed the moon alternately, throwing mist-wraiths into the valley. The silence and dimness lent to the scene an even greater than its wonted mystery, while the hazy mist-movement distilled an impression of unknown and hostile presences lurking close at hand. Wallscourt was several times on the point of suggesting a return to the hotel, but Morris pressed on, finding his way as if by instinct to a rough tree-trunk bridging a stream, which he crossed, and then followed a path that led to a ruined gatepost.

'Come here, Edward, here. This is where we stood by this broken gate—she on that side, I here. She met me once on just such a night as this. Her grey dress looked silver in the moonlight: she wore a large, shady hat tied with blue ribbons, and her face was radiant like light upon dark

waters. I remember hearing the rustling of the grass as she came towards me. . . . What was that?' Thornhill gripped his friend's hand. 'You heard? . . .'

Wallscourt nodded. There had been a perfectly distinct sound, like the swishing of skirts over grass. The next moment, he could almost have sworn he saw the shadowy form of a girl flit past on the opposite side of the hedge. . . . It was, of course, the misty light, the silent hour, the strange tale. . . .

'You saw it?' whispered Thornhill, tightening his grasp, 'young as ever, lovely as ever,—ghosts don't get old, you know. Well, she hardly thought to find her lover in the flesh, waiting at the gate, the same—after a hundred years. I too am a ghost,—what else? . . . Look, it is coming back! . . . this way . . . at this side of the hedge now, you see the grey dress that looks like silver? . . . you hear the rustling?'

'Thornhill, this is folly,—let us go back. We are both overwrought, hysterical . . . we imagine . . .'

'She has turned,—she will not meet me,—even her ghost disdains me. How it all comes back! For I love her more than ever! . . . I must speak to her. . . . Yes, yes, I know it's only a ghost . . . what matter? . . . I must tell her that I have suffered . . . that I have been faithful . . . always. . . .'

Before Wallscourt could stop him, he had leapt the barrier. Immediately he was engulfed in the darkness, which was by this time complete. The doctor followed hastily, calling aloud his friend's name. Once or twice he fancied he heard

a reply; several times, so quickened was his imagination, the swishing robe seemed to brush by him. He stumbled on, striking himself against the branches of trees, foundering in swampy places. Quite unexpectedly he came upon the stream, and slipped into one of the shallower pools: he managed to scramble out somehow, and going more cautiously—still calling to Thornhill—he saw at last the welcome light of a lantern, moving over the meadows in his direction.

'My friend! I have lost my friend!' cried the doctor to the figure approaching him. He was almost inarticulate with anxiety and foreboding, and pointed unconsciously in the direction of the lake. The man, who had been sent from the hotel to look for the visitors, asked one or two sharp questions, to which Wallscourt could only return vague and unsatisfactory replies.

'It's dangerous ground about here at night, I warn you,' the man said, and it was decided that Wallscourt, lantern in hand, should go back to the hotel, and return with more assistance.

. . . . . .

The white dawn found Wallscourt trailing back weary steps in the wake of a search-party whose efforts had been . . . vain.

The mountains flushed faintly in the growing light, but the face of the lake was black—inscrutable. . . . Perhaps it was the fairer part of childhood, the nobler part of youth, that Thornhill was to experience after all.

AN AUTUMN TRYST

SHE drifted through the woods like a faded leaf. The world was lit with the faint, golden radiance of autumn. A dim cinnamon flame, like the fire in marble, crept through the arches of the bracken, that were lifted beyond the tree-stems: the leaves of the beeches, losing the sap that had made them luminous screens to the sun, now burned with a pale light of their own. The soul of the year, half-freed from the bondage of material things, seemed delicately poised for flight: in the woods the sky-spaces opened wider and wider. As yet there had been no tussle with the elements, no pangs of dissolution; and the exquisite moment of acquiescence lingered.

Dr. Fraser leaned against a beech-trunk, and looked impatiently up the glade. He was a man about thirty-five, rugged in figure and countenance. His face showed that determination which is based on a profound knowledge of the certainties of Science. His present eagerness, and a certain softness of emotion, sat strangely upon him.

Presently he saw her approaching down the vista of dead

leaves. She wore a brown holland dress—the day was very warm—and a drooping hat of brown straw. She came swiftly, but there was languor in her movements.

'Onora!' They clasped hands.

Holding her two hands, he looked down into her face. A chill went to his heart. Was this indeed the woman he had wooed in the spring,—this thin, faded creature? Surely some illusion of autumn must be infecting his seeing; his eyes, filled with the colour of withering gold, must be transferring to her, qualities which belonged instead to the landscape and the season. It was impossible that all her fresh beauty should have waned, in so short a time, to this frail sweetness.

She led him to a spot where the trees gave a sparse shade, and where there was a view of the open. Her dress rustled and crackled over the leaves. They sat down under a beech-tree, and Onora threw off her hat. Under the flitting leaf-shadows, the doctor fancied he saw threads of silver in her hair of clouded gold.

'Dear, tell me,—have you been ill?' he asked.

'You find me different?' she said gravely, 'do I look ill, Oliver?'

'A little pale, a little tired,' he replied. In point of fact, she did not look ill. Her eyes retained their vivid blue—the same colour as this autumn sky; her flesh had the delicate hue and contour of health, though it was wanting in the richer tones, but she looked unaccountably worn — she looked almost old.

'Do you mind that I am changed?' she asked.

'I want you as I have always known you,' said Dr. Fraser, 'I mind, of course, if you have been lonely—anxious.'

'Oliver, I did not think you would notice so soon. . . . Perhaps I ought to have told you in the spring, only I fancied that love might turn the current of my existence into the normal direction.' She began toying with the fallen beech-leaves, and then looked out over the undulating bracken. 'The year is fading,' she said.

'What can you mean, Onora? Surely your love for me is not altering, is not growing cold?'

'No, no, indeed no. It is the one real thing, the one unmistakable reality. Only my blood runs more feebly at this season than at any other; my life wanes, a little, with the life of the leaves.'

'You find it more difficult to love me in autumn than in spring?'

'How can I explain it to you, Oliver? I am sensitive, strangely sensitive, to the influences of the earth: spring, summer, autumn, and winter go to the very roots of my being. In every year I experience youth, and maturity, and age.'

'Dear, you have lived too much alone, in too close contact with Nature,' said the doctor, a little uneasily, 'these are the fancies born of brooding in solitude.'

'But you yourself see how the autumn works in me,' said the girl, 'only my eyes keep young—the rest of me fades like a leaf; and I can show you white hairs that I found last winter. In winter I am quite old, my face is pinched—even wrinkled. But then winter—this is the compensation,

Oliver, for you as well, I think—winter is the most spiritual moment of my life. There are no leaves, no earthly screens, to keep away the sense of the surrounding sky. I feel clothed, more than at other times, with sunlight and starlight and moonlight.'

'Dear, this is a poetical statement, not a physical fact,' began the doctor.

'It is a physical fact, Oliver, capable, I believe, of scientific explanation,' said Onora. 'I have inherited from both sides a rare sensitiveness that subdues my body to the seasons. My mother was a peasant,—for centuries her ancestors had lived in close communion with the earth, which had yielded its intimate secrets to their dumb keeping. My father was a poet,—a great poet, as you know—and there is something of him in me, though, like my mother, I have no words. Then from my earliest years he gave me loving and peculiar insight into the ways of Nature: I feel that the Earth-Mother has entered in an unusual degree into my parentage, and has given me a right beyond others to claim kinship with all these lovely things of the world.'

'If your hypothesis were true,' said the doctor, 'do you realise that your case would stand as a reversion to a primitive type, and that you would be retrogressing to a point in the evolution of humanity that has long been overpassed?'

'You have yet to prove,' said Onora smiling, 'that the ancient peoples who lived close to Nature were not wiser and happier than ourselves.'

'The thing is self-evident, Onora. Freedom is the first stage of all progress. We have triumphed over Nature,—subdued

her, made ourselves independent of her smiles and frowns, shaken off the trammels of the seasons. It is only in detachment that thought can take shape, only in detachment that we can attain the undreamed heights of Science and Philosophy. Why should you pride yourself on the weight of chain that drags you to the earth?'

'I believe that in the earth is the only wisdom,' murmured Onora, 'I am sure that in the earth is the only happiness. I am no materialist, Oliver; but to-day, when all the ancient heavens are crumbling around us, I recognise the heaven beyond all these imaginings in the daily glory of the world—the woods, and the fields, and the skies. Does this seem to you fanciful, foolish?'

'That you should find joy in Nature, that you should discover the spiritual behind the material, this I can well understand; but not that you should be willing to abnegate your personality to the stray impulses of the moment,—not that you should choose to submit yourself to the caprice of the seasons.'

'You speak as if the matter were under my control. Oliver, Oliver,—you won't let it make any difference to our love? You loved me in the spring—surely it was not only the spring in me you loved?'

'Dear, I loved you—the you that still exists under all these hallucinations.'

'Hallucinations!'

'I must attribute these fancies to a powerful imagination working in solitude. There are many instances of imagination working on the physical medium.'

'When spring comes, I shall be young again, Oliver, fresh as when you first knew me. . . . It has always happened. I see you dread the fact that every year I must grow old. . . .'

'It is unnatural, Onora, abnormal.'

'And rather than have me abnormal, you would believe me—not quite sane?'

'I simply believe that the poetical impulse carries you a little too far.'

'I had dreamed myself privileged, blessed beyond others,' murmured Onora, 'I have known such great peace, such happiness.'

'Don't think me hard, unsympathetic. My daily experience in cases of hysteria makes me perhaps over-emphasise the importance of perfect balance, of the divine average. I have always been impatient of mysteries. Dear, it is your own sweet personality that is precious to me: I cannot reconcile myself to these metamorphoses which transform you into a species of hamadryad, or wood-nymph. I feel that it requires only an effort of will to free yourself from the chains that bind you to the earth, that separate us.'

'I am neither a hamadryad nor a wood-nymph, Oliver. I am a woman—a woman who loves you.'

She laid her hand upon his arm. The doctor was startled by the thrill of passion in her voice. The character of the day had changed.

The sky was filled with hurrying clouds, and from between them a fierce storm-light travelled over the landscape. The sweep of languorous radiance sharpened into colour-

contrasts, deep indigo in shadow, and rust-brown in light. The bracken turned from cinnamon to bronze, the beech-leaves from yellow to copper. Suddenly, a tide of sunset-red flooded land and sky. The world, no longer submissive, was summoning its last vitality to fling a bold defiance at Death, whose wings could already be heard rustling in the far tree-tops.

Onora sprang up, flushed with a fire that did not seem of the sunset. The red glow was in her hair. Her eyes had lost their clear morning blue, and were shadowed by dusky flame; a splendour of determination characterised her expression, and the voice that had sounded so thin, rang out in clear, low notes.

'I love you, I love you!' she cried, 'I will break my bonds, as you call them,—will do even this, if only so I may reach you. But you are sure, Oliver, sure that you would have me ordinary, like other women? You are sure that I shall lose nothing in your eyes, by shutting off from myself the fountainhead of all beauty?'

'It is you that are beautiful, Onora. The fountainhead is in yourself,' exclaimed the doctor. 'I ask nothing extreme; but —yes—I would have you as other women. At present the world of Nature absorbs too much of you; the fields and the sky are my too powerful rivals. I want you to be mine, mine alone. Oh, I am not all selfish: it is partly for your sake.'

'I love you, Oliver; this is the strongest thing in me,' said Onora, 'what need of more words? Meet me to-morrow here at twelve o'clock. . . . No, dear; I must do what has to be done alone. There is peasant-blood in me, remember,

and hereditary knowledge of certain rites, which you would call superstitions.'

'Oh, I shall be glad when all this is laid aside, when we can meet on common ground!' exclaimed the doctor, a little impatiently.

'You will not have to wait long . . . to-morrow, at twelve o'clock.'

After he had seen her to the gate of the Manor House, the doctor paced for a considerable time the twilight woods. It irked him that he could not disentangle a clear image of Onora from the three distinct impressions she had left upon his mind. The picture that had dwelt with him all the summer, of a creature of exquisite possibilities, of radiant promise, could not be reconciled with the woman of to-day, either in her mood of languid quietude, or in her accession of passionate splendour. And as he pondered over these later manifestations, he came slowly to realise the fulness and range of an exceptional temperament—a temperament capable of vibrating to every variety of emotion. It was her naïve joy in life, her buoyancy of spirit, that had drawn him to her in the spring: then she had captivated his fancy, but now the depth and richness of her nature began to work upon the more virile stuff of his being. This woman of strong and delicate maturity made appeal to a higher man than the girl had been able to touch; and the doctor felt exalted in the thought that it was love for him that had wrought this change in her. The correspondence of her mood with the mood of the year, was probably no more than one of those curious coincidences, of which life is so full:

intensely sensitive, intensely imaginative, she attributed to her body experiences which were only of the mind. The doctor could not for a moment admit the possibility that this winter should see her old, and the following spring make her young again. Love had come to her in the spring, and had ripened her personality by the time of autumn; but had she loved first in autumn, spring would have brought maturity. That she should hold herself free of the seasons was greatly to be desired, else they might impose all manner of fanciful complications upon their wedded life; and the doctor ardently hoped that her foolish 'rites' might prompt the initial effort of will necessary to cast off this imagined tyranny.

The next morning was misty and dank. The leaves on the ground lay formless in moisture; the leaves on the trees huddled shapeless in the wet fog. The doctor shuddered lest Onora also should pass under the sway of this chill autumn mood. At the first glance he was partially reassured. She looked almost as young as she had looked in the spring. But she seemed to lack spirit, and came droopingly towards him.

She held up her face to be kissed. The expression was diffident, appealing. There had always been a glamour about their former meetings, a glamour which had persisted even under yesterday's first shock of disappointment. To-day a painful sense of the commonplace overmastered his emotion at seeing her.

'Are you pleased with me, dearest? are you satisfied?' she whispered anxiously.

'Always, always,' said the doctor, marvelling at the difficulty of speaking with conviction. For she had grown young again for him, young as by miracle, yet not young as when he had first known her. Then she had been young with the poetry, the sentiment of youth; now she was young only through lack of years.

'Oliver, beloved, you have taken away from me all my old supports,' said Onora. 'Dear, I have only you now,—only you. Your love is my whole life, everything. Tell me that you love me, give me something to cling to, I feel so weak, so helpless.'

'I love you, Onora,' murmured the doctor. Where was her old charm, the magic of her loveliness? He looked down at the pretty graceful creature clinging to his arm with agitated insistence. All that was individual, the grip of independence, the vigour of personality, had gone; and instead there was left a colourless entity, sweet and good and gentle, no doubt, but with no initiative, no impulse to development, a thing to be shaped by circumstance, by environment, by any stronger will that chose to mould it.

'Oliver, speak to me, give me your assurances.'

'Dear, what need have we of vows and protestations?' said the doctor miserably, 'have we not always understood . . . without words?'

'It is different now,—different, different now!' said Onora; 'yesterday I had the great Mother-Earth to lean on. I drew strength from the character of the day. Your love was an episode, oh! the central episode, the great episode, in the glorious procession of the year. Now you have emptied

my life of everything but you. Oliver, it is terrible, it is terrible!'

'Why terrible, Onora?'

'It makes your responsibility too great.'

The doctor shuddered. He knew he could never fill the void he had made, especially now, when he had only pity to give. 'I was never one to shirk responsibility, you know,' he said, 'the more so when it is of my own creating. Indeed, you distress yourself unnecessarily. . . .'

'Oh, it is not right for women to love overmuch!' cried Onora, 'our roots should be in the heaven or in the earth, not in the heart of a fellow-creature. We women have need of some other anchorage than a man's love.'

'Dear, calm yourself: these doubts and fears are strangers to you.'

'I was not less human, I was not less worthy of you, when the seasons flowed in my veins,—when I had kinship with the beauty and joy of earth. But if it is love you want, all there is of me is love for you. So be satisfied,—be satisfied.'

The doctor suppressed a groan as he thought of the vigour and glory of personality that might have been his, and that through his own fault seemed gone for ever.

'But, Onora, it is not possible that in one short night you should have cut yourself from Nature so absolutely, so effectively.'

'Don't say it was a mistake. Yes, yes,—it is done. I have reached that higher point in the evolution of the race, I have thrown off the trammels of the seasons. I am become a

shadow to myself, without blood or substance. And oh, you look so differently upon me! Yet I am as you said you would have me, like other women. . . .'

'You are yourself, that is enough for me,' said the doctor bravely, 'and in time you may grow sensitive again to the beauty of the world, sensitive to the invigorating influences, from which, ignorantly and selfishly, I tore you.'

Onora shook her head. Then she looked up at him with a wistful smile. 'Perhaps,' she said, 'if some day I should be drawn very close to the great forces of Death, of Birth—who knows?—I might again enter into the spirit of the Earth, which is peace and happiness. . . .'

And in the anticipation of this possibility, the doctor was able for one moment to forget the glorious goddess he had lost, in the gentle, insignificant woman at his side.

L

HE LOOKED UNEARTHLY IN THE MOONLIGHT

THE MURKY POOL

I WAS exploring the byways of the Docks at Rotherhithe for the purpose of catching local colour upon my mental palette, to be afterwards transferred to the pages of the realistic novel I was engaged upon, 'The Submerged Soul.'

I had chosen an unpropitious night, if I sought for realism. The mist, thinned and radiant with moonlight, set a haze of beauty over the commonest objects: the prosaic glare of infrequent street lamps softened into misty suggestion; the warehouses were turned to rich darkness, or glimmered with silver dreaminess ahead. I passed through woodyards whose alleys were lined with straw-coloured gold, whose turrets towered into a white immensity. I caught, up vistas, the frail lines of mast and rope intertangling spars in airy crucifixion. It was as if the souls of inanimate things had escaped from bondage, and hung, half-materialised in the medium of the moon, about the deserted wharves and ways.

I came in my wanderings upon a murky pool, back of the river, surrounded on all sides by tall warehouses, except where it communicated under a dilapidated bridge with an ancient stagnant canal. There was desolation about the

place—on all sides the oppressive narrowness of blind walls, hemming in a stillness and a darkness as of death.

As I stood on the parapet looking into the murky water, there spread over its face a phosphorescence like the phosphorescence that hovers above decay. It shot from end to end, a woven splendour of confused tints, purer and more vivid than those we make out of our granular earths. And as I watched, the colours sorted themselves into familiar combinations. I caught glimpses of the pageant of life, the shows of the streets and of spring. A never-ending procession of vague flowers shifted before my eyes in the procession of the months — snowdrops, violets, primroses, bluebells; then the hues of all these were piled together, glimmering from street barrows in fog—then I saw the hurrying of vast multitudes, neutral-tinted, and gaudy traffic, half-caught suggestions of moor aflame with gorse, of moonlight-crinkled sea—the whole a shifting phantasmagoria, indefinite, confusing, shallow.

Above all, shallow. I never lost consciousness of that murky pool, whose very murkiness gave cause to this surface-play. There seemed some secret lurking in the depth of the water which this transient flitting of impressions served only to cover. The longer I watched, the more certainly I became convinced of this hidden secret. It called to me from the bottom of the pool. I felt as if this iridescence were drawing a veil between me and some compelling reality. I moved to see if it were less disturbing where the shadow fell thickest, and so came upon an old man sitting motionless on the parapet and gazing intently into the pool.

He glanced up as I approached, and addressed me. 'Don't you think,' he said, 'that the sense-impressions are clearing?'

He looked unearthly in the moonlight,—a small-built man with flowing white hair and beard, and an expression of such intense wistfulness in his blue eyes that he reminded me of elves and faery creatures that yearn after some sublime tragedy they can never know. His eyes were again fixed on the pool, patient and searching. There was habit in his whole attitude,—in the crouching figure, in the poise of the head; I knew he must have sat there night after night, perhaps for years.

'The pool is clearing,—it is decidedly clearing,' he murmured.

'How do you account for the extraordinary phenomenon of iridescence?' I inquired.

He answered me without moving his eyes. 'You notice,' he said, 'the thick murkiness of this pool: it is always in a material nature that the sense-impressions are most vivid, and I take it that this pool is a tangible symbol of the present material age,—perplexed and wearied by a variety of fleeting impressions, thin and substanceless as reflections in a mirror. Note how the colours change and flash,—how beautiful they are, how elusive! Yet they stifle the real life, the inner life, the life of the soul, which exists, which I wait for, which I shall one day see. Night after night I watch for the symbol of the soul of man to float up out of those murky depths . . . night after night . . . night after night.'

His appearance had not led me to guess that he was mad, and I felt the surge of an infinite pity. There is nothing so

pathetic as the snapping of chords just because they are strung too high in our aim after the subtlest music. The strange old man seemed to have in him the instinct both of philosopher and poet, but he had gazed too long upon the dazzling mystery of the water, and in its glamour reason and reality had slowly ebbed away.

Whether it were that at this moment the moonlight increased in fervour, or that the fog lifted somewhat, there could at least be no doubt that the colours upon the water began to pale and grow dim. The old man clutched my arm, and a glittering excitement took the place of the still patience that had previously shone from his eyes.

'I am not mistaken . . . the pool is clearing?' he whispered hoarsely.

'It is clearing,' I replied.

At last the colours seemed only as a shimmer of cobweb over the glassy water; then they were gone altogether. The pool lay before us, blank, dark, inscrutable.

Something rose from the depths to the surface—something that glimmered radiant and white—rose, and sank again.

'The soul, the soul!' murmured the old man.

'The Submerged Soul. . . .' The title of my book flashed involuntarily into my mind; but aloud I said, 'It is some one who has been drowned.'

'O God, O God! have we indeed killed our souls? Is this the reading of your allegory?' said the old man, rocking himself to and fro on the parapet. 'Is this the revelation of the pool? And have I waited hopeful through the years only to see a dead thing at the last? But I will not believe

that the soul is dead. What we saw was asleep . . . or unborn.'

'Hush!' I exclaimed.

It rose to the surface again. This time it did not seem like some one that was drowned. On the contrary, it impressed me as some essence of vitality, stripped of colour and form. The thing was too dimly seen to attain to the seat of consciousness through the senses; but it reached the inner vision independently of them, and filled it with a pale, spiritual light. Illusion, no doubt, but extraordinary, inexplicable. I peered more closely into the water, repeating the words of the old man, 'Asleep . . . or unborn?'

When for the third time it rose, he stood up on the parapet. 'Bride of the world,' he cried, 'supreme Beauty, hidden too long under the tinsel of our earthly shows, wait for me! I come!'

He would have sprung into the water, but I held him back, and dragged him struggling from the spot. I do not know by what ways we went, but we reached at last a sordid, flaring little street, hideous with the noise of the closing of public-houses. Here he managed to slip from me; nor could I ever find again the murky pool, to investigate by chemical tests the cause of its strange iridescence; nor did I ever obtain tidings of the old man who had sought to elude the trammels of the senses, and wed with the submerged soul of the human race.

THE LEPER'S WINDOW

SHE shivered as she entered the church.

'How chill it strikes!' she said.

They had come into this grey, empty gloom, already dusked by the approaching twilight, out of the vivid glory of an autumn day. Basil Kent was writing a short monograph on Milton, and he and Sybilla Deering, to whom he was engaged, had planned a country excursion under the pretext of visiting Milton's cottage at Chalfont St. Giles and the old village church. The walk from the station would be for ever memorable to them both. It was as full of enchantment as the time of Haroun al Raschid; the distant fields opened in great rifts of jewels, emerald and ruby; the trees flapped languidly with ruddy flame that defied the daylight; mystery lurked in the azure and opalescent distances, and an autumnal glamour transfigured the veriest grass-blade. The changing changelessness of the world carried them back in imagination to ancient epochs. They looked upon the landscape with eyes borrowed from Saxon, from Plantagenet, from Tudor times; they were Crusaders that found in the gorgeous colouring reminiscences of the barbaric East, or Puritans meditating on divine mysteries as they

walked across the fields to visit Milton. And through all these fancies Sybilla saw, as through a halo, the dear reality: the keen, sweet face of Basil Kent—a face stern, austere in outline, softened and shadowed with the tenderness of love. But as she entered the church a chill struck through her—a physical sensation that yet affected the mind with something like a sense of foreboding. The marvellous glamour of the day became in memory ominous; it seemed like the Celtic glow that precedes disaster. She felt as if she had been walking upon the fragile edge of a beauty that would shatter into winter and death.

This was the first day that Basil Kent had become fully aware of her extreme sensitiveness to impressions. The variations in leaf-tint seemed to excite in her subtly differing emotions; she caught the spirit of the past times they had chatted about with an exact insight that threw sudden illumination on his year-long studies. In Milton's Puritanic little room she had closed her eyes that she might enter into the soul of the blind poet; and when she opened them to tell him that she had seen visions of divine glory, it did not occur to him to suggest the misty gold of autumn lingering on the retina: she seemed so near to deep, inexpressible things that she might well be able to pierce into the very heart of their mystery and meaning. And how potently the church impressed her, vague in the dusk, dumb with the weight of years! Her exquisite face, cut against the smooth stone pillar, was pale as ivory; a transient fatigue showed upon it vaguely, like the shadows on ivory, and some of the light was gone out of her starry eyes.

The little old caretaker pointed out to them the ancient frescoes on the walls, the brasses, and the tombs. He then led them to the chancel and showed them a small window, through which could be witnessed, from without, the service of the church. Such windows, known as 'lepers' squints,' have been built into many churches, so that when leprosy was common in England its wretched outcasts could, through this means, participate distantly in the divine service, and receive distantly the Church's forgiveness and blessing.

At sight of the window Sybilla grew rigid with horror. The whole tragedy of a leper's life was borne in suddenly upon her mind—its awful loneliness, its frustrate aspirations. But her realisation was merely intellectual—emotionally the sufferings of such an outcast were beyond the pale of her comprehension. Her sympathies went out rather to the ignorant people of past ages, possessed with an unreasoning terror and driven to unreasoning cruelty. She understood their condition of mind, and excused it. She felt that thus to refuse her sympathy to a life of such dreadful agony was unworthy of her; she strove to think of the leper as a fellow-being, with thoughts and feelings like herself; in vain—her reason had lost all power, and she shuddered from head to foot.

She sat down on the altar steps opposite the window, trembling and exhausted. 'I am tired, Basil, and will rest here a little,' she said. 'Will you come back and fetch me when you have been round the church and churchyard?'

They left her, and the darkness grew about her. It clung to the arches with a shadowy sense of fear. It assumed body

in the darker ingles, developing into lurking shapes. Sybilla was in that condition of physical fatigue when the imagination is preternaturally active — unless she controlled her thoughts she knew they would evolve into horrid presences. With an effort of will she forced her mind into other channels —she conjured up the ancient celebrations of mass, the solemn chantings of other days. The scene grew before her: the swinging censers, the tinkling bells, the priest in his gorgeous vestments, raising the Host above the kneeling worshippers. She wondered if he ever glanced at that window—the lepers' window? . . . God in Heaven! there was a face there now—a face white as death, white as snow. She sprang up terrified. It did not pass away. It was no illusion of the brain, no hysterical fancy. The face shone in upon her through the gloom with dreadful whiteness—a familiar face, but distorted with horror. She grasped the altar-rail to save herself from falling. Then it was gone.

Something had come into the church and was approaching her. She gave a half-stifled shriek as it loomed nearer. Could it be Basil? Was it his face she had seen at the window, so horrible, so white?

It was too dark now for him to notice her emotion. He came quite close up to her and spoke in a low, hoarse voice. 'Sybilla,' he said, 'I have had a terrible shock. I looked in at the leper's window just now—I wanted to put myself in the place of a leper, to imagine how a leper felt—and, Sybilla —the horror of it!—the scene was familiar—absolutely familiar down to the smallest detail! I recognised the curious perspective and angle of pillar, the shape of window,

the proportion and colour of altar, and reiterated flashes of some forgotten existence leaped and leaped through my brain. I saw mistily the celebration of a shadowy mass—it was a torture of mysteries beyond my comprehension, of promises beyond my hope; I experienced a misery which even in memory racks my whole being. I knew an existence different to its roots from the one I now know; my thoughts were many-coloured, limited, grotesque; my ideas strangely concrete. Sybilla, in some past life I must have been one of those dreadful outcasts—I must have been a leper: think of it, a leper! . . . Sybilla, are you ill?'

He caught her in his arms as she fell, and carried her, half-fainting, into the open air. A new moon cut sharply the softness of lingering sunset, and there was sufficient light to see the rigidity, the painful tension, of her face. He cursed his rash impetuosity that had led him to jar her nerves with his horrid tale, knowing how sensitive she was, how easily overwrought. She breathed more freely in the fresh air, and presently opened her eyes; then involuntarily shrank away from his touch.

'Are you better, dearest?' he asked anxiously.

A flood of tears came to her relief. She sat down on a tombstone and sobbed and sobbed. Kent stood watching her in dire distress. He had never seen her other than calm and bright, and her agony of emotion alarmed him. He knelt beside her and strove to take her hand. 'Sybilla, Sybilla!' he pleaded.

She stood up and moved a few paces away from him. 'Basil, shall I ever be able to explain to you?' she

murmured, 'I saw you at the window, white—white as snow,' she continued, in a low whisper, 'your face, I did not know it; but it was horrible, horrible! Basil, I shall never see you any other way again.'

'Sybilla, this is madness!' cried Kent, 'I was pale and horror-stricken because of that strange illusion I told you about—the illusion of familiarity; but now, in the clear evening light, I am myself again; you must forget that ghostly glimpse of me. Come, dearest, say I am forgiven for causing you so cruel a fright.'

'I am very sorry, Basil,' she replied, 'but, indeed, it can never be the same. I *did* love you—now, you only inspire me with fear. I know, I know. It is foolish, irrational, unkind. But it is stronger than I am; and here I must bid you good-bye.'

'You are still under the influence of the shock,' he said, 'the terror of it will pass away. In a day, in a week, the memory will be dim; you will forget, you must forget.'

'Basil, I cannot reason, I can only feel. . . . We must be brave, and part here and now.'

'Sybilla!' . . . It was the voice of one who is heartbroken.

'I want you to get me a carriage at the inn,' she said gently, 'I am very tired, and I will drive to the station. You must not come with me, Basil. . . . I must travel by myself.'

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